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Colombia: 35 Years and Still Struggling

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Colombia: 35 Years and Still Struggling

The civil wars in Colombia have caused the deaths and disappearances of many innocent victims. Guerillas, insurgent groups and paramilitaries are all fighting to find peace, yet peace seems far away.

by Jenny Lange, *MAIC*

"I was nine when it happened. I worked with Papa in the fields. We had just cut down a vine to weave a basket when my friend stepped on a mine. He died, and the mine opened my stomach. My papa wrapped a towel around my stomach. I must have been unconscious because I have no memory of that. He told me about it at the hospital after I had had surgery." A young Colombian boy remembers his traumatic encounter with a landmine in Colombia. Encounters like these happen too often in Colombia, due to years of civil struggle. Landmines have been used by all fighting groups in Colombia: the country's army, the guerillas and the paramilitaries. The exact amount of landmines is unknown; some estimate over 80,000. The placement of the mines is also unknown, yet they continue to take the lives of many innocent victims. In many areas, farmers would rather have their children stay at home to remain safe than to walk to school and gain an education. The civil wars in Colombia have been devastating and long, and the end is not in site.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, Colombia suffered three major periods of conflict. The first, *la violencia*, was a result of a divided political system and involved a protracted but substandard civil war. The second was the 'war' against the Colombian state launched by Pablo Escabar of the Medellin cartel and other various drug traffickers. The third, and possibly the most dangerous eruption of violence, revolves around the current insurgencies, especially that of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Many contemporary news accounts label the conflict a "thirty-five year old civil war," basing its origin on the official formation of several guerilla groups in the mid-1960's. However, the roots of the principal guerilla group, the FARC, date back to the peasant armed self-defense movements formed between 1948 and 1958 during the period of *la violencia*. The FARC and other guerilla groups have been known to use landmines as a principle source of terrorism and continue to use the mines today against many innocent civilians, harming lives, education and the economy itself.

La Violencia

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Colombian politics was dominated by the Liberal and

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia rebels stand in formation during a practice ceremony outside of San Vicente. *c/o AP*

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Members of an army demining team search for landmines planted by leftist rebels of the National Liberation Army in Colombia. *c/o AP*

Conservative parties whose influence was felt throughout the whole country. Differences in ideology between the Liberal and Conservative elite echoed throughout Colombian society, many times resulting in outbreaks of violence that placed the Liberal and Conservative factions against each other. 200,000 Colombians died during the decade of *la violencia.*

In the late 1940's, Liberal Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, having surfaced from the Liberal and Communist led agrarian and labor reform movements, was a leading presidential candidate. Gaitan was assassinated on April 9, 1948, triggering a violent uprising by the Liberal lower classes that caused major looting and destruction in the capital. This uprising is known as the *Bogotazo* and was followed by many similar Liberal peasant uprisings throughout the country, pitting Liberals and Conservatives against each other.

Conservative candidate Laureano Gomez won the presidential election in 1950, after two high-ranking members of the Liberal party were assassinated in 1949. Gomez considered Liberal peasants parallel to Communists and responded to the uprisings with violent repression. Liberals in the national police force were replaced with extremely brutal conservative peasants. In the early 1950's, the Gomez regime's repression became more intense along with the violence between the rural Liberals and Conservatives.

In 1953 Gomez was overthrown, and General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla rose to power. Pinilla attempted to reconcile citizens of the country, yet his plans backfired and the war between the Liberals and Conservatives grew. Pinilla responded by launching a major military offense against the peasant Liberals, known as the War of Villarica. It was during this offensive that the armed self-defense movements formed, later to be known as the FARC.

The FARC, Guerillas and Cocaine

FARC is the most powerful guerilla group in Latin America comprised of 17,000 members, which is more than the Colombian government, and is accountable for numerous deaths. It is the only guerilla group with peasant roots that pre-date both the National Front and the Cuban Revolution. Other guerilla groups, such as the Popular Army of Liberation (EPL) and the Army for National Liberation (ELN), were all movements led by urban intellectuals. Initially, the FARC was concerned with the socio-economic issues of peasantry and poverty, but it is believed that the traditional insurgent group has grown into a traditional criminal or drug trafficking organization.

Naturally, the FARC leadership denies all involvement in drug trafficking. Yet relationships are known between the drug traffickers and FARC guerillas. The most prevalent relationship is one in which the FARC units tax the drug trafficking business, providing protection in return for money or payment in cocaine. Yet, others argue that FARC is not only involved with protection of drug cultivation areas and laboratories, but includes the transportation of drugs and chemical precursors and in some cases, direct control of cocaine producing laboratories. Rand Beers, Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, argues that the FARC and the ELN, the other major insurgent group, "are receiving pure cocaine in payment for services provided to the drug traffic, and reselling it" to Brazilian criminal organizations in return for armaments. Evidence has shown that the FARC is attempting to widen its base of arms suppliers. Despite an estimated annual income of $500 million (U.S.), FARC purchases significant amounts of weapons with cocaine. FARC leaders say they will continue to use money from illicit drugs, not only cocaine but heroin and marijuana, to finance their escalating war.

Half of Colombia's territory is now controlled by the Marxist guerillas in league with cocaine growers and drug traffickers. This controlled territory is spilling over into neighboring countries with reports of guerilla incursions into Venezuela, Panama and Ecuador, as well as sightings of coca and poppy plantations in Peru operated by Colombians. These guerilla groups are guilty of using landmines throughout the country. One reporter visiting Colombia and studying the social strife notes "Coca profits fuel Colombia's war just as surely as extortion and kidnapping. And much of the fighting going on in Colombia is rooted in a struggle over who gets to control the money flow."

The Threat of Landmines

Nearly all major guerilla groups have publicly acknowledged that they not only use but also manufacture AP mines. The Colombian Armed Forces have identified and denounced the production of AP mines by Colombian guerilla groups. Most of these mines are homemade, using cheap and easy to find materials. According to the Colombian Army's Press Agency, in the past few years there has been an increase in the use of homemade antivehicle mines by guerilla groups. The antivehicle mines are manufactured with gas, oxygen or refrigerating cylinders.

AP mines are also manufactured and used by cocaine, poppy and marijuana growers to protect illegal drug crops, and to keep the Army and others away from their laboratories and stockrooms. Information collected by the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines (CCBM) indicated that at least 135 of Colombia's 1,050 municipalities are mine-affected. The 135 municipalities cover a total area of 145,000 square kilometers or 13% of the national territory.

Colombia's Armed Forces reported that 52 mines placed in San Jose de Sumapaz department were discovered on February 28, 2000. The mines were found along village paths, around the school and football field, and near the radio transmission station on Granada Mountain.

In November of 2000, two land mines were discovered outside a town hours before a U.S. senator and the U.S. ambassador were scheduled to visit. Though the U.S. officials were not the intended targets, they could have been victim to the mines.

One author reported on the innocence of landmine victims: "In their attacks, guerillas employ methods that cause avoidable civilian casualties in violation of international humanitarian law, including the use of landmines and gas canister bombs packed with gunpowder and shrapnel."

Colombia signed the Mine Ban Treaty on December 3, 2000, but has not yet ratified it. Other attempts to legally control the production and use of landmines have been implemented. Colombia voted in favor of the December 1999 UN General Assembly resolution supporting the Mine Ban Treaty, and participated as an observer in the First Meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty in Maputo in May 1999.

Conclusion

Some fear that the likeliest outcome in Colombia is "stalemate," complete with corrupt officials, black marketers, narco-traffickers and of course, the insurgents. The country's never-ending cycle is far from ending, and the population continues to live in fear. More has to be done for the country besides stopping the drug cartel. The problem's roots reach back to a long-lived civil war of peasantry and socio-economic issues. The social and political unrest is left in the hands of insurgent guerilla groups and drug traffickers. Where to begin in order to see the end is something Colombia has been and will be anticipating for years. ■

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